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Lawmakers argue over spending on aircraft that has yet to fly

By ERICA WERNER

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Democratic lawmakers argued Tuesday that Congress should stop spending money on an aircraft that's never become airborne over two decades of research and testing.

Republicans pushed for continued support.

Neither the Pentagon nor NASA ever wanted to invest money in the DP-2 aircraft, meant to hover and take off and land vertically, but the program has gotten more than \$63 million over the years at the

direction of Congress. An additional \$6 million is being proposed for the 2008 fiscal year, supported by Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., the former Armed Services Committee chairman who's now running for president. Hunter's district is close by the duPont Aerospace Company in La Jolla, Calif., that's building the plane, and he and other Republicans have gotten tens of thousands in donations over the years from Anthony duPont, the company president.

"This project is just fraught with problems," said Rep. Brad Miller, D-N.C., who chaired a hearing on the issue by the House Science oversight subcommittee Tuesday.

"Should we continue to fund this, or is there an accountability by Congress?"

Hunter defended the concept of the DP-2 as "extremely difficult to achieve but extremely valuable." "The Pentagon doesn't come up with every great idea," said Hunter, explaining why Congress has repeatedly overridden executive branch opposition.

"There's not a bird on the runway today ... that we developed in four years," he said. "You don't develop anything in four years."

DuPont says the aircraft would be capable of ferrying up to 48 troops into combat zones and landing on rooftops or oil drilling platforms.

It has never hovered successfully and has suffered four mishaps in its attempts to do so. During one such attempt, a test pilot was aboard -- in violation of safety protocols, according to House Science Committee Democrats -- but he was unharmed.

Reviews by NASA, the Navy and the Pentagon's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency have found the technology unworkable and the program ill-managed.

"To continue to fund it would be an insult to the aerospace industry at large and to the taxpayers," testified John Eney, former head of the aircraft conceptual design group at the Naval Air Development Center Naval Air Systems Command, who led an onsite review of the program in 1999. form

Eney criticized Congress' involvement in the project. "It is not their role to take a constituent's proposal, bless it as being gospel truth, and pitch it as if they were a salesman for that contractor," he told the panel.

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